

THE LATERAL VIEW

MESSI'S unexpected Maradona parallel

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Carlos Javier Mac Allister played with the great Diego Armando Maradona. His son, Alexis, is playing with Lionel Andres Messi. Only one other father and son duo, Diego and Gio Simeone, can make the same claim. Like millions of other families, the Mac Allisters have long engaged in the inevitable and endless debate about which of the two greats is better. Carlos obviously leaned towards his close friend and teammate Diego, while Alexis swore by Leo, but only till recently.

Perhaps biased by recency, or by his son's and country's recent fortunes being so closely tied with that of the younger legend, Carlos admitted in a recent interview that, if he was asked right now, he would say that Messi is the best. Not because Messi has achieved more; indeed, Mac Allister Sr. rates Maradona's achievements with inferior club and country sides as unparalleled, but because Messi serves as a better example for generations to follow. An example of professionalism, discipline, and longevity. Compared to Diego's more self-destructive practices.

Carlos Javier is quick to also point out though, and this is a point I have made before, that it is futile to compare players across generations. "Compare Messi with those playing now. Don't compare Messi with Maradona or Maradona with Di Stefano," he says.

Indeed, one cannot compare but as I saw Messi getting into uncharacteristic confrontations in the quarter-finals match against the Netherlands, I could not help but imagine a convergence of his and Diego's legacies. Leo has always been the cooler customer on the field. If anything, sometimes one got the sense that he was perhaps too cool.

Messi's Argentina and Messi's Barcelona, with whom he has achieved most of his success at club level, are not the same ilk of footballing teams. While the club side was a well-drilled unit, composed of some of the finest talent that football had to offer, the national team often lacked similar ability and cohesion. Messi's calm brilliance may have been enough to achieve glory in Barca but one felt that for Argentina to achieve on the greatest stage, Leo had to do more than just play great football. He had to push them on through sheer will and unrestrained emotion.

In Qatar World Cup, Messi is trying to do just that. He is much expressive, much more aggressive, and much more emotional. Much more, I daresay, like Maradona.



Morocco fans brought the streets of Rabat to life after each of their memorable wins in the 2022 World Cup. With a team that has true European footballing pedigree in the ranks, they will be hoping for a much, much grander celebration in the coming days.

PHOTO: AFP

Morocco 'miracle' a long time in the making

SABBIR HOSSAIN

Morocco may have defied extreme odds to get this far in the 2022 World Cup showdown, making history by becoming the first African nation to reach the semifinals, but is their gigantic feat a mere fluke? Well, it is far from it when we look back at how Achraf Hakimi and company operated so far.

While Hakimi may not be a household name yet despite being possibly the best right back in the world, in club football, he has been sharing the limelight alongside bonafide superstars, the likes of Kylian Mbappe, Neymar, Lionel Messi and more, for the star-studded French League champions PSG.

Born and raised in the Spanish capital, he had honed his skills for a decade in the academy system of Real Madrid, the reigning La Liga and UEFA Champions League champions.

It would not be wrong to hypothesize that because of Hakimi and his teammates who share similar backgrounds, the Atlas Lions are now daring to dream the impossible as holders France pose the penultimate hurdle in their quest for the coveted trophy.

In Qatar, the ratio of Moroccan players with European upbringing is quite staggering. A total of 14 players in their squad were born outside the home soil and converged from six different countries -- France, Spain, Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, and Canada. What's more, 20 of the 26-member squad play football in a variety of top European clubs, including PSG, Bayern Munich, Chelsea, and

Sevilla, leaving only three players hailing from the local league in Morocco.

It is no surprise that footballers' profiles and personalities on the pitch are shaped by their upbringing and the leagues they play in. The likes of Hakim Ziyech, goalkeeper Yassine Bounou, and Noussair Mazraoui, along with Hakimi, possess champion mentality, having played in the world's most competitive leagues, which is necessary for a team to go all the way. And the notion is clearly supported by the fact that Morocco, so far, had the last laugh against title contenders Belgium, Spain, and Portugal, and held fellow semifinalists, Croatia.

In each of those matches, Morocco's off-the-ball tactics were brilliant, often captivating. Their defence, which includes captain Romain Saiss and Hakimi, has been watertight and is supported by the midfield, with Sofiane Amrabat marshalling the line between defence and offence. They make defending look like an art, and stats back the notion as they conceded only once -- that too an own goal in the group stage against Canada -- in their five matches till date.

On the attacking front, they have been no less ferocious, inventive and opportunistic, capitalising on the few opportunities that popped up. Morocco coach Walid Regragui deserves a lot of credit for the disciplined combativeness sustained by the African nation. After their win over Portugal last Saturday, he told the reporters: "I'm sure many of you will say this is a miracle, but we've won without conceding against Belgium, Spain,

and Portugal and that's the result of hard work."

Like many of his players, Regragui is also a foreign-born Moroccan national; France, in his case. The 47-year-old played 45 matches for Morocco from 2001 to 2009. A defender in his playing days, it seems his skills have rubbed off on his charges. It has been evident in Qatar as all the 11 men, time and again, managed to hold their fort and maintain composure in their own half without the ball, soaking up pressure like a sponge.

Regragui landed the job in August following the departure of the previous head coach Vahid Halilhodzic in August, but critics were unsatisfied. But with little time on hand ahead of the World Cup, he accomplished marvels. And this has happened not only because of his tactical ingenuity, but also due to a squad full of talented individuals, with a fine blend of youth and experience, who possess the ability and sheer mental strength to implement what has been taught by the coach from minute one to 90, or 120 if need be.

Morocco's miracle run was indeed in the making but they cannot afford to bask in their already-achieved glory as they must adopt the same tactics against France tonight at Al-Bayt Stadium.

Will they be able to extend the dream run and make it to the final by blunting the intimidating attacking threat of the defending champions? If they play as they have throughout the tournament, they certainly can.

Upamecano Rabiot, worry ahead of semi

REUTERS, Doha

France defender Dayot Upamecano and midfielder Adrien Rabiot are both doubtful for Wednesday's World Cup semifinal against Morocco after missing collective training on Tuesday.

Centre back Upamecano and Rabiot, who suffer from a cold, are on light training indoors, the French federation (FFF) said. Upamecano had already missed Monday's training session.

Should they be ruled out, Ibrahima Konate would start at centre back while Youssouf Fofana would be expected to be alongside Antoine Griezmann and Aurelien Tchouameni in midfield.

However, Tchouameni's fitness is also a concern. He sat out training on Tuesday after complaining about pain in his calf.

It was a rather relaxed training session for the French, careful not to overexert themselves this late on in the tournament.

Kylian Mbappé, Ousmane Dembélé, Raphaël Varane and Theo Hernandez all warmed up in sneakers, making little effort to touch the ball.

Tigers look to get combination right as 'tough' Test awaits

SPORTS REPORTER from Chattogram

Tigers look to get combination right as 'tough' Test awaits

Sports Reporter from Chattogram
The Tigers go into the first Test against India today after a break of almost six months from the red-ball format. Head coach Russell Domingo admitted to the difficulty of one-format stars coming back in for Tests and straight into what he felt was a tough series, with India looking to get all available points for their World Test Championship ambitions.

Bangladesh lost six of their eight Tests this year with their only win coming at Mount Manuganui at the beginning of the year against New Zealand and a drawn Test against Sri Lanka at Chattogram.

Domingo informed Tigers will not be risking Taskin Ahmed for the first Test while hoping that Zakir Hasan, in his debut 'can get off to a good, quick start tomorrow', ending speculation on who will appear beside Mahmudul Hasan Joy in opening slot in what appears to be a flat batting track at Chattogram. Nurul Hasan Sohan was also being banked on for wicket-keeping duties, Domingo said.

There was an uncertainty regarding skipper Shakib Al Hasan's availability after he went for a scan yesterday morning during



PHOTOS: FIROZ AHMED

the team's training session due to stiffness. Domingo came to the press conference in Shakib's stead as the all-rounder went to the nets and batted for a bit. Domingo said the team management were 'still assessing' Shakib's situation due to struggles with 'ribs and shoulders' but the all-rounder looked his usual self during the nets session and is

expected to play.

The bigger worry was the form of Mominul Haque. While the left-hander, one of the one-format stars, batted at the nets yesterday there is a chance poor form may see him fail to return to the playing eleven. Joy appeared for the A team's tour of India recently and Domingo reiterated both him and Mominul

BANGLADESH VS INDIA IN TESTS			
Head-to-head	Matches	Bangladesh 0	Draw
	11	India 9	2
» With 442 runs at an average of 55.25, debutant Zakir Hasan scored the most runs in the recently concluded National Cricket League- Bangladesh's first-class competition.			
» Virat Kohli's last Test century came against Bangladesh in November 2019 in a pink-ball Test at the Eden Gardens in Kolkata, India. The batter was dismissed by Ebadot Hossain.			
» The visitors last played a Test in Bangladesh seven years ago in 2015. The one-off Test curtailed by rain ended in a draw at the Khan Shaheb Osman Ali Stadium in Fatullah.			

were looking good despite not being amongst runs.

"Mominul and Joy are looking good at the way they are playing. I know the currency is runs, but technically they are looking pretty good. Joy has got a lot of starts, so it is just about finding that tempo and get the big score," Domingo said.

With Taskin out, Ebadot Hossain and Khaled Ahmed are likely to make up the pacers' slot today. The dilemma would be whether to go for three spinners with Taijul Islam waiting in the wings.

"It is the difficulty for the one-format players, but Taijul has a fantastic attitude and desire to play for Bangladesh. When he comes back, he lifts the team by 10 per cent. He is a trump card for us in Bangladesh," Domingo said.

Domingo focused on not being able to turn the tide in close situations and while pointing out that consistency from the young side was a difficult challenge.

"We know it's a tough series, but I expect us to push India really hard in this series," he said at press conference before pointing out matches in South Africa away and Windies at home

"A lot of the games have had swings that have been really close. I think Liton Das and Taskin has been fantastic. Ebadot has stepped up. Mahmudul Hasan Joy scored a hundred in South Africa. It is just stringing these good performances together consistently, session after session that has sometimes been the challenge for us," he said knowing that an immense effort will be needed to thwart India.